

Canadians Going to China

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Who should read this?

Since I got back from my China trip last November, a bunch of people have asked me for advice and recommendations. I have written down some of the highlights in my journal . I'll try to put everything together here so that all the info I usually share when people ask, "What should I do if I want to travel to China?" is in one place. This will be a specific and hopefully helpful guide, just for Canadians who are planning to go to China. I will also try to link to many helpful resources that actually contain some of the details that I touch upon.

Where should I visit?

China is a massive country! It's the third largest in the world, after Canada. I bet most Canadians haven't explored all of Canada, and it's impossible to visit China in just a month, and even less so in a week. You can probably live in China for an entire year, and still will not explore all it has to offer. So you'll need to plan your trip carefully, consider how much time you will have. A return trip from Canada to China will take two whole days off your itinerary, so keep that in mind! Less is more. Divide your trip so that you try to stay at least two or more nights in an area so you are not at a rush to explore the place. Chinese cuisine is a plethora of dishes and you will be glad to stay the extra days just to sample the food. Do not rush it.

Book your flights to a tier one city, one that is closest to where you want to go, and do not forget about the high-speed rail network, and the convenient DiDi ride hailing service. Trip.com also offers airport transfers to and from your hotel, typically with super comfortable, luxurious vans or sedans.

Many average ranked hotels are already quite nice with enough space to sleep, along with clean washrooms and showers. Personally we liked the Atour Hotels 亚朵酒店 and Orange Hotels 桔子水晶酒店. They are a popular hotel chains with hotels all over major cities in China. We like the Trip.com app when booking with hotels. You may not get the scenery or a fancy, shiny lobby. If you want to stick with Western brand names, they all exist, from Marriots to Hiltons, etc.

Preparing your phone is a must!

Your phone is going to be your best buddy while in China. I highly recommend that each individual have their own phone, and the phone should be unlocked so that it can accommodate a Chinese SIM card (more on this later). To prepare your phone while in Canada, you will need to download the following apps:

WeChat This is your go to app for 90% of the activities while in China. You should pair a Visa and a Master Card credit card to your WeChat account. When setting up the credit cards, you may need your passport and may be requested to take a facial photo of yourself, so be in a well light environment. Within WeChat, there are mini-programs that you can use to book travel, hail a taxi service, and order take out. There are many YouTube videos that teaches you how to prepare. Just search for “Prepare WeChat for China”. If you do not have WeChat installed, then it will impact your trip. So much so, that I really would not recommend visiting China without the WeChat app installed.

AliPay This is an alternative payment app that you should also download and associate the same credit cards that used for WeChat. There are times when WeChat does not work for certain vendors. You will use this as your backup. Some people like to use AliPay as their primary and WeChat as a backup.

Trip.com I already mentioned this. There is a mini-program in WeChat as well, but you can download as a separate app on your phone. This is an excellent app to search and book for train routes, hotels, and flights.

DiDi You can also use DiDi, a ride hailing service, as a separate app or use a mini-program within WeChat. You will find many useful services are already associated with WeChat as mini-programs.

Meituan This is a very popular takeout app, but also have many other functionality such as rent a bicycle, etc.

LetsVPN Your normal Western apps such as Google, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and others will all not work due to the Great Firewall of Chinese. The same is true for Gmail and other Western-based online services. If you really need to gain access to these apps, you can use this VPN app to bypass this restriction. However, be forewarned that this may not work everywhere in China. I have tested this specific app and I encountered no problems when I traveled, but past experiences do not guarantee future outcomes as the Chinese government continues to change and upgrade their security policy on their national firewall.

Why do you need a Chinese phone number or SIM card? Aside from the cost savings of having your Canadian number roaming in China (last checked was \$14/day), most Chinese service provider will also call you while fulfilling the service. For example, the DiDi driver may call you to locate your precise location or give you special instructions for pick up. The Meituan delivery person may give you a courtesy call to let you know that they have arrived at the condo lobby and they cannot get pass security. Having a Chinese number will save you a lot of long distance charges as well. You will be answering and making some local calls. There are also many services that authenticates using local SMS messages.

SIM cards are available at popular international airport in first tier cities. We have also used Ni-hao Mobile . You will also need your passport when setting up this service. We found this service to work really well. There is no automatic or online cancellation of the service, you will have to contact customer support either by phone or using WeChat when your trip ends. This is probably the only downside or annoying part.

For short stays, you can use an eSIM called Airalo . They will only provide you with a Data service, without a phone number. This option is only good for day trips and is not a viable option for stays one week or longer, in my opinion.

It is probably prudent for your love ones back in Canada to also register a WeChat account, so you can contact them while in China.

It is possible to use both your Canadian and Chinese numbers at the same time. For more information on this, checkout my article, Cellphone Roaming on our China Trip .

Last but not least, if you don't have a power bank for your phone to recharge your mobile phone on the go, I strongly suggest that you get one. We like something like this a Magnetic Portable Charger for our iPhone available on Amazon.

How to scan a QR code?

In Canada we use the Camera app to scan the QR code. This will not work in China. You must use the WeChat or AliPay app to scan the QR code. When paying, the vendor can either scan your QR code or you can scan theirs.

When you are at a “normal” restaurant (not a fancy one), or street side joints, the menus are either accessible through a QR code or displayed on a poster. Most of these places are order first and prepaid before serving.

Do you need a travel Visa?

At the time of writing if you are transiting in China and have arrived at one of the eligible airports, you are eligible for a 240 hour visa-free transit . Note that if China is your final destination then this is not available to you.

A week is just a taste of China. To see the country properly, you will need multiple visits. China offers up to a 10-Years Visa with multiple entries, each lasting 30 days to 6 months depending on the circumstances. I would recommend that you just take the time and apply for a Multi-Year Visa in Canada at the Chinese Visa Application Service Center .

Do you need to register?

If you are not staying at a hotel, then within 24 hours of your landing, you must register at a police station. For most people staying at a hotel, this is not a concern because the hotel registers on your behalf.

Is it safe in China?

Our experience is that China is super safe. They have public and street cameras everywhere. Although people are more likely to keep to themselves, and less outgoing, many are opened to questions, if you approach them in a friendly manner. You can go out any time during the night, and not have to worry about any violent or gun related crimes.

If you are of East Asian descent, I highly recommend learning a bit of Mandarin. The locals might give you a funny look, and some might even feel a bit offended if you speak English to them while looking like a Chinese. “Hi” and “Bye” are still universally accepted. As for other statements, they might think you are being arrogant or acting like you are better than them. I know you are not but that is how it may be received. Learn simple phrases like:

- Thank you.
- Good morning.

- Good night.
- How much is this?
- Where is the washroom?
- What is this?
- Learn the numbers and wind directions.

Many modern translation app will help you with the above endeavor.

How to take a taxi?

Many big cities have their own taxi services, but we think DiDi is the best. They're great for getting around the city and even for traveling between nearby cities. And guess what? They're usually cheaper or just as good as local taxis, and most of their cars are well-maintained. You may even get to ride on a more fancy EV (Electric Vehicle).

When you're ready to order a ride, make sure you're already at the pickup point. If you're not, the car will likely arrive before you, and the driver will call you. Sometimes, the driver will call you to confirm if you want to pay the tolls if the route has them.

Pickup at the airport or train stations has designated areas for DiDi. Just look for the signs.

How to take local transit?

If you feel the need to explore the city through subways and buses, then you can either use the mini-programs that is related to the local transit system. These mini-programs will automatically access your WeChat pay mechanism. We did this when we were in Shenzhen, Guangzhou, and Shanghai.

Alternatively, you can use Apple Wallet. Open the Apple Wallet on your iPhone and your phone should automatically recommend the "transit card" you should install for the local transit system. Be sure to do this when you arrive and not in Canada. Otherwise you will get something like the PRESTO card for Toronto.

How to take high-speed rail?

High-speed rail in China is super convenient! We usually book our tickets through the Trip.com app. There are no physical tickets. Your reservation is linked to your passports. When you arrive at the station, find your platform. About 10 to 15 minutes before the departure time, they'll start letting passengers go to the platform. Make sure you're in line for the "manual" passport check.

There are three classes in China. The lowest class is Second class. Their highest class is Business class, and First class is in between. Their business class is worth a try for a short trip.

The train stations are always upgrading their technology. When we were in Hong Kong, they had automated check-in for foreign passports, but that was an exception.